DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 256 400 EC 172 920

AUTHOR Morgan, Gwen
TITLE Public Attention and Concern about Sexual Abuse in Child Care.
INSTITUTION Child Care Action Campaign, New York, NY.
PUB DATE Dec 84
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Day Care; Day Care Centers; *Parent School Relationship; Prevention; *Public Policy; *Sexual Abuse

ABSTRACT

Two types of response are needed to deal with growing public concerns about the dangers of sexual abuse of children in child care. First, sound and reasonable advice to parents should focus on the comparative statistical safety of child care, clues from children about the possibilities of abuse, the importance of parent monitoring of child care, reporting procedures, and observation of child care staff. Secondly, public policy efforts should attempt to turn public concern to constructive long-term policy decisions. Such directions include impoved resources, better procedures for dealing with complaints, public information, and changes in regulations, such as state licensing improvements and more effective criminal record checks for day care providers and staff. (CL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED258403

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

December 1984

PUBLIC ATTENTION AND CONCERN ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE IN CHILD CARE by: Dr. Gwen Morgan

Scandals in both family day care and centercare have stimulated major and growing public concern about the hazard of sexual abuse of children in child care. There are two types of response that are needed in the media, and from resource and referral staff: (1) sound and reasonable advice to parents, preferably in print; and (2) recommended action in public policy to turn the public concern to constructive and long-lasting policy decisions.

Sound and reasonable advice to parents

In the face of sensational news stories parents are alarmed and confused. In America, parents already experience guilt over the fact that they need to work, and the news stories deepen that guilt. Parents need information that is objective and factual about what the risks are, and how to protect their children.

In-depth news analyses could provide some of this information. The columns could be photocopies or reprinted for continued usefulness with parents.

State licensing agencies or social service agencies could print up flyers with factual information of interest to parents. Some states have already produced such material, for example, Florida.

R&Rs could develop handout material, to give parents in response to requests for information.

Some of the points that could be made in material for parents include the following:

- Sexual abuse in child care is not found in just one city or state, but has been uncovered in Manhattan Beach California; Chicago, Alabama, Honolulu, Nevada, Minnesota and New York. Licensing agencies in some other states have information about still more cases not yet before the judicial system.

- Despite the fact that these cases are coming to light, sexual abuse is not a special problem of day care, but part of a larger societal picture. As far as we know, most sexual abuse of children is perpetrated by family members, neighbors, and other trusted individuals. The American Humane Society estimates that 68% of sexual abuse involves a parent, and only 1.5% involves babysitters or child care workers.

- From this statistical perspective, children are actually safer from sexual abuse in day care than they are within the family, or left free to roam their neighborhoods. Unless parents know they have someone they can trust with their children, a child care center is probably a place where sexual abuse is less likely to happen than in more private, unregulated forms of care where the contact between children and adults is totally without outside scrutiny.

- parents should try to understand their own feelings of denial and avoidance of the horror of this topic, so that they will be open to any clues their children may give them that something is wrong. When children show signs of unhappiness about their day care

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Gwen Morgan TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

arrangements, or report anything bad about what goes on there, parents should check it out. Children do not make up details about sexual abuse; if they tell parents about it, it is probably true. If they show signs of unhappiness, there could be a number of reasons, but parents can find out a great deal if they compare notes with other parents using the same service. Parents should not use a day care service that does not give them access to other parents.

- parents should continue to expect and want warm and affectionate touching of their children from the men and women who provide child care. They should be clear in their own minds where the difference lies between normal touching that satisfies basic human needs and the abnormal touching that is sexually exploitative and deviant.

- Parents can and should talk to their children about not letting strangers touch them or take them anywhere, and about confiding in parents if anybody does abuse them. These precautions are important in any neighborhood. To some extent, children can be encouraged to say "no" to touching of the wrong kind, but the basic protection of children must come from adult society not from the children. Young children cannot be expected to be distrustful of family members or of caregivers to whom their parents have entrusted them. Young children cannot understand that someone who does nice things, such as giving candy, could be other than nice. It is not desirable to undermine, completely, children's basic trust in all adults.

- No regulatory agency can guarantee complete protection. Sexual abuse of children is abnormal activity that is different in kind from the quality issues regulated by inspections to assure compliance with standards. While licensing helps by deterring deviant people from too-easy access to children in day care, it is not an absolute guarantee. Only parents who visit day care twice a day; and only parents who can monitor programs enough to be sure they are trustworthy, provide a guarantee against abuse. Parents should make it a point to drop in to observe their day care programs; and caregivers must welcome and understand parents' need for this self assurance.

- Parents should report all cases of suspected child abuse to the state's child protection agency, and to the licensing agency, just to be sure of getting the right state agency to take action. If the parent has only very vague feelings that cannot even be called a suspicion, they can talk it over with a child care referral counselor at a resource and referral organization if there is one in their community. The referral counselor, who also talks with other parents, may be able to add the parent's vague doubts to other information received from other sources, and act more quickly to protect children; or, on the other hand, may help the parent to remove the doubt.

- Observation is a potent weapon against abuse - parents may sit quietly in the classroom or at the home of the caretaker, or they may participate as a volunteer in the program. In either case, they should watch carefully - is there someone whom the children, a child, seems to avoid. It is unlikely that anyone will take a child away if a parent is watching. If a parent drops in often enough, however, they will notice if there are

children who are away from the group and should try to find out why. See if children are very busy with some activity. If every time a parent visits before placing the child in the center - and anyone should visit several times before making this important decision, the children come over to see or talk to visitors, or pay a great deal of attention to any outsiders, parents, at least, should question why they are not more interested in what they are doing.

The best defense against placing the child in a center or home where he or she might be hurt is to watch the people who are taking care of children very carefully. Giving up a child to someone else's care is a serious decision. It is worth taking time to decide.

Public Policy Responses

Whenever there is public concern on an issue, the climate is favorable for policy change. Child care advocates should be prepared in this case, as in all others, to recommend changes in public policy that would be responsive to the public concern.

Some actions to improve the day care system that would be responsive to the concern about sexual abuse would be the following.

- Resource and Referral
  - federal funds to establish new R&R's
  - state funds to establish new R&R's
  - federal or state funds to a large number of R&Rs to improve recording of parent complaints; procedures for dealing with complaints

Public information
- Brochure for parents, to be distributed by R&Rs, licensing agencies, and day care programs

Regulatory Improvements
- More effective criminal record checks for family day care providers, and for day care center staff; federally funded action because of the interstate nature of this issue. Federal funds for additional state staff.

- State licensing improvements. Federal leadership is recommending key requirements, and in issuing informational material for the public on how the present requirements in the state measure up against recommended requirements. Some requirements that states could adopt that are relevant include:

  o parent access. A requirement should state that "Parents shall be permitted and encouraged to visit and observe any part of the center or family day care home where children are in care, at any time when children are in care. Parents should be informed of this policy." This type of requirement is feasible, and does not cost anything to the states.

  o required training. A requirement for ongoing training does have cost, but the cost is feasible. Requirements for training should be flexible enough so that attendance at workshops and conferences could be counted as training if

there is evidence of successful participation. But they should not be so loose that centers can count their own staff meetings as training. Training would have to be provided by a qualified person, and a record of the topics covered in the training should be kept as evidence of compliance with the requirement.

Training has an indirect effect on sexual abuse, in bringing more attention to more providers with more opportunities to screen out inappropriate people; as well as adding more quality options for parents to choose over potentially harmful care.

- o Adequate licensing staff. While sexual abuse cannot be prevented through licensing inspections alone, it is probably that a more effective regulatory system with parent access, required training, criminal record checks, and routine inspections from trained licensors would help. Centers should be inspected at least once a year, preferably twice a year, with additional visits for centers with serious non-compliances and/or complaints by parents. In the case of registered homes, there should be random spot inspection of at least 20% of the homes, over and above investigation of all complaints and follow-up on non-compliances.

- o Clarify in statute the relative ~~has~~ responsibilities of the licensing agency and the child protection agency when abuse takes place in day care, rather than at home.

Finally, in seeking action responsive to this issue, it is important to point out that there are deeper underlying causes.

Only with some type of subsidy can quality care be offered at affordable prices, while paying decent wages to caretakers.

The quality-wages-affordability triad of issues has been addressed through trading off wages. In some areas of the country, wages have now become so low that trained, dedicated providers are leaving the field of child day care, and it is no longer possible to find qualified applicants. Trained providers of care have been seen by someone who provided the training, over time so that an opportunity was afforded to screen out inappropriate caregivers. As wages become so low that trained provider will not enter the field, we have made it easy for sexual deviants to seek access to vulnerable children in day care, as in residential programs for children. It will not be easy to protect children until weare willing to reward caregivers for their training and dedication to the field.

Further, there is no single, accountable agency responsible for overall day care policy. Child care has been avoided in public policy since 1971 when a comprehensive bill was vetoed by the President. A number of agencies have a secondary interest in the subject. It is difficult to get priority action when there is no system to hold accountable.

Produced and distributed by:

Child Care Action Campaign
99 Hudson St. Room 1233
New York, N.Y. 10013
(212) 334-9595